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ABSTRACT

Using a question-and-answer format, this booklet addresses eleven of the most frequently posed questions about community, technical, and junior colleges and attempts to allay misunderstandings about the nature and role of these institutions. The questions cover the distinctions between the different types of 2-year college; their history and missions; programs and degrees offered; instructional orientation; clientele; student goals; the extent of minority student participation; reasons for student attrition; sources of financial support; and the continued expansion of the colleges. The answers provided emphasize the variety of community college programs; the base of the colleges in the community; the expansion of the colleges since the late 1950s; the distinctive role of community colleges in contrast to 4-year institutions; their role in providing lifelong learning and accessible, low-cost education; the areas in which degrees and certificates are offered; the commitment of faculty to teaching rather than research; the variety of students attending the colleges and the diversity of their goals; the growth in minority enrollments; the significant impact of the colleges on the economy; and the important role of community colleges in providing occupational education to two-thirds of all postsecondary occupational education students and the significant position of vocational education within the college curriculum. (HB)

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AACJC Pocket Reader 3

Some Tough Questions About Community Colleges

By Dale Parnell

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VC 820 393

American Association of Community and Junior Colleges

By Dale Parnell

Dale Parnell is president of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges which represents a field of 1,200 institutions enrolling 11.4 million persons in credit and non-credit programs. Prior to assuming the presidency of the Association in 1981, Dr. Parnell was president of San Joaquin Delta Community College in California. Previously he was chancellor of the San Diego Community College System. He served earlier as Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction and as president of Lane Community College in Oregon.

He is an advocate for community colleges with a strong personal and professional interest in vocational education. He is a spokesman for community colleges and to community colleges on the need for strong partnerships with business, industry, and labor.

Some Tough Questions About Community Colleges

By Dale Parnell

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Introduction

A Major Force Misunderstood

Community, technical, and junior colleges have become a major force in American postsecondary education only in the past 20 to 30 years. The colleges have been operating for a long time, but there still are misconceptions and misunderstandings about the nature and roles of these three kinds of institutions.

Concise Answers to Questions

The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges has attempted to identify the most frequently asked questions about community, technical, and junior colleges—particularly those that reflect confusion—and to provide concise answers to them. More detailed information can be obtained from your local college or from the Association.

New Excitement In Your Life

To understand fully the nature of the college, we suggest that you visit local

campuses, meet with administrators, dedicated faculty, and enthusiastic students. Better yet, take a course or enroll in a full program that challenges you to find new excitement and meaning in your life.

Question 1: We hear the terms junior, two-year, community, technical, and just plain college applied to the institutions. What is the difference in all of these terms?

Answer: Early in the history of the movement, the colleges labeled themselves "junior colleges." Many tended to concentrate heavily on the liberal arts areas. Many were privately-supported institutions that saw themselves as junior to the senior colleges and universities.

But today we are talking primarily about community-based colleges. "Community" is the most widely used term to indicate comprehensive offerings in the liberal arts, occupational education, developmental education, adult and continuing education, and community services at publicly-supported community colleges.

Some of the institutions are called technical colleges and institutions. They often are institutions that have a history of giving priority to technical programs.

Education cannot be measured in terms of time. The term "two-year" is often used to distinguish community colleges from four-year institutions. However, these institutions actually offer courses and programs of six weeks, one year, two years, and even longer. They are a major resource for lifelong learning.

Question 2: Community colleges appear to be relatively new to the higher education scene. They seem to have sprung up quickly. What kind of history and background is there?

Answer: Historically, the community college has opened the door to college opportunity for all citizens. While community colleges are innovative in their approaches to higher education, they are not exactly new on the American scene. They do have a history and tradition, having evolved over a period of more than 80 years.

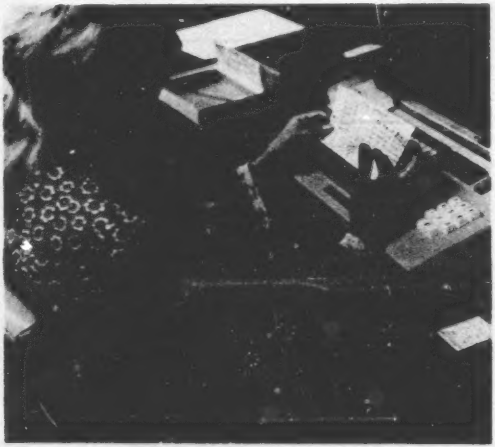
Community, junior, and technical colleges have been operating in this country since before 1900. However, it was not until the 1960's, when there were many pressures to equalize educational opportunity, that the community colleges "boomed"—growing at the rate of about 50 per year. State plans, developed in the late 1950's, resulted in establishment of many state-wide systems of community colleges.

Today there are 1,219 enrolling more than 11 million persons for credit and non-credit—7.1 percent of all Americans over age 18. In most states, the community colleges have been well planned as an important part of the total higher education program.

Question 3: Many Americans tend to think of "college" as a four-year institution. Is it the goal

of most community, junior, and technical colleges to become four-year private and public colleges and universities?

Answer: No! Community, technical, and junior colleges do prepare many students for transfer to four-year colleges and do that with excellence. But our institutions have their own purposes and perform their own distinctive roles in higher education. They fill a void left by many four-year colleges and universities by endeavoring to stay within financial, programmatic, and geographic reach of citizens, especially middle income Americans. They are distinct because



they:

- Provide the well-accepted associate degree.
- Provide lifelong learning opportunities.
- Are community-based.
- Are low-cost to students.
- Are student-centered.
- Provide excellent college transfer programs.
- Provide first-rate technical education.
- Provide easy geographic access.
- Help individuals get started in college.
- Provide *opportunity with excellence.*

Question 4: Four-year colleges and universities award degrees to students when they complete their education. What does the community college have to offer to signal completion of a program or a course of study?

Answer: The community college is accredited to offer the associate degree—in the liberal arts, in business, in science, in arts, in health, in various technologies, and other fields. The degree helps to provide a ticket to jobs and to further education, including a liberal education.

Certificates of completion are offered in more specialized areas—such as in real estate work, automobile mechanics, photography, and a host of job training programs. Such certificates help to qualify individuals for well-paying skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Through additional study, of course, people in these fields can also work toward associate degrees.

Question 5: Community colleges say they offer excellent instruction. On what basis do they make this claim?

Answer: Community, technical, and junior colleges are teaching institutions. One of the high marks given to community colleges by students is on the quality of teaching. Reason: Individuals join the faculties of these institutions—often with considerable experience in their fields of

speciality—because they want to teach. And because the colleges want them to teach—not to write learned papers, or do elaborate research, or travel on the lecture circuit—though the colleges do encourage them to expand their horizons when that does not interfere with teaching. Keep in mind that the great scholars and writers attached to major four-year colleges and universities rarely teach freshmen and sophomores.

Question 6: Do community colleges serve the academically talented?

Answer: Yes. Community colleges serve students with all kinds of academic backgrounds. Increasingly, high school students with excellent scholastic records are finding, for a variety of reasons, that community colleges are good starting points for their educational and professional careers. These colleges give them choices as well as chances at a cost that is more reasonable than it would be to go away to school. For many young people, staying at home for a couple of years while attending a community college may save them from making mistakes at a distant, more expensive college.

The academically talented student is welcome at a community, technical, or junior college and will be challenged and well served. Many colleges offer special honors programs and other challenges for such persons.

Question 7: I've heard community colleges serve a lot of people with a wide variety of educational goals. How do your colleges do this so well?

Answer: Community, technical, and junior colleges provide a multitude of opportunities with excellence. True, they must make enormous effort to meet a wide variety of students at the point of individual need. And that is the particular genius of these institutions. They have put occupational education in the mainstream of postsecondary education right alongside the liberal arts.

The community colleges started with the promise that they would open the doors of opportunity for the many—rather than the few. They were ready to acknowledge that sons and daughters of factory workers could benefit from higher education that would lead to occupational and even professional development. Sons and daughters of professional men and women, and of managers and directors, have also found the community college to be an excellent resource.

It should be kept in mind, too, that this nation is taking steps to remedy the inequalities of the past. The community college offers tremendous opportunity for those willing to try. And millions do:

—4.8 million enrolled for credit in fall 1981

—4 million enrolled for non-credit in fall 1981

—7.1 percent of all U.S. adults 18 and over enrolled in a community, technical, or junior college in 1981-82

—53 percent of all first- and second-year credit students enrolled in college in 1980 were in community colleges.

Question 8: Community colleges are said to enroll a large percentage of all minority students who enter college. Why is that?

Answer: The community college takes pride in providing opportunity with excellence for many persons of ethnic minority backgrounds. Minority enrollments in college have increased dramatically in the last 30 years—primarily due to the low cost and accessibility of the community college. Developmental education, along with personalized counseling and advising, provides added incentives for students who need special assistance to get onto the next rung of the ladder.

The community college makes every effort to see that students enter programs in which they can succeed and that will lead to rewarding careers and jobs—whether in professional or managerial fields or in skilled or semi-professional work. There is no tracking. Any student who does not wish to pursue a baccalaureate degree will find many other options.

Here's part of the record of service to minorities:

—Black and Hispanic credit students are represented at higher than average population rates in community, technical, and junior colleges.

—Community colleges enroll more than half of the minority undergraduates attending postsecondary institutions, a higher proportion than any other sector.

Question 9: We hear a lot about attrition. Some students seem to drop out of community colleges before they complete a degree. Why is that?

Answer: Too often, attrition is equated with the term "drop-out." Some older students, already in jobs, may take only as much of a course of study as they need to help them upgrade themselves.

Getting jobs—or getting better jobs—is success, not failure, even though it does not show on college records as a completion. And in a highly mobile society, some younger students move from institution to institution, or to jobs without completing programs.

Because of large enrollments and the consistent flow of people in and out of all kinds of colleges, it is difficult to document attrition as traditionally defined.

Question 10: This is a time of increasing taxpayer resistance to supporting social services—particularly for schools and colleges. Why are community colleges supported as well as they are?

Answer: Obviously, the easiest answer is that the institutions are helping people—taxpayers themselves—to become higher earners and thus greater contributors to the economy. They rescue many who would be far more of a drain on the taxpayer than are the community colleges.

More directly, they provide the mindpower that is required to draw business and industry to communities. They improve productivity by turning out people who can do better jobs than they would without technical training. Colleges themselves are heavy buyers of equipment and services in any community, thus plowing even more of those dollars back into the economy. Their faculties and students make up an important segment of the buying public.

In short, the colleges put money and trained workers *into* the economy. They don't take away from it.

—Community, technical, and junior colleges are a $10 billion a year national industry.

—For every tax dollar invested in community, technical, and junior colleges, $4 is returned to the economy.

—Almost two-thirds of the students, 63 percent, are enrolled in occupational pro-

grams that prepare them for immediate job entry

—Almost 90 percent of the part-time students and 50 percent of the full-time students are employed.

—Community colleges provide thousands of special courses for business and industry to help improve productivity and the economy.

Question 11: Why are community colleges still growing when there was a slowdown in the birth rate during the past 20 years and a decrease in the potential number of college-age students?

Answer: Community colleges look on education as a lifelong process. They offer programs that attract many adults and even older Americans. The average age of the community college student is between 27 and 30. Many of the students are workers and family people who want to improve and upgrade themselves for better jobs; others may come to the community college because they missed out on college in their youth.

Increasing numbers of people who already have associate, bachelor's, or even graduate degrees take courses at their local community colleges—some simply because they want to

continue to learn and others because they want to train for new careers.

The colleges virtually run around the clock and on weekends to accommodate lifelong education. That's why enrollments in community colleges are increasing at a greater rate than in any other type of institution. In the fall of 1981, community college enrollments increased over 1980, whereas four-year enrollments remained approximately the same. Here are some statistics:

- two-thirds of all postsecondary occupational education students are enrolled in community colleges.

- 63 percent of the credit students in community colleges in 1980 were enrolled in occupational education courses (a total of 4.5 million).

- 57 percent of all students in occupationally-specific programs are enrolled in community colleges.

- 1,400 different occupations are represented in the training programs provided by community, technical, and junior colleges.

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